

AUTOFICTION OF THE COGNITARIAT: *SELF-CRITICISM OF A BOURGEOIS DOG*

ELISA CUTER

FILMUNIVERSITÄT KONRAD WOLF BABELSBERG
(GERMANY)

Elisa Cuter is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Filmuniversität Konrad Wolf in the project "Cinematic Discourses of Deprivation". She is the author of *Ripartire dal desiderio* (minimum fax, 2020), and one of the editors of *Precarity in European Film* (DeGruyter, 2022), the first volume in the book series she co-curates "Film, Class, Society". <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2651-9436>

Corresponding Author

Elisa Cuter

e.cuter@filmuniversitaet.de

elisa.cuter@gmail.com

Filmuniversität Konrad Wolf Babelsberg

Marlene-Dietrich-Allee 11

14482 Potsdam

Germany

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Abstract

Artists and intellectuals living in precarious conditions (or: belonging to the cognitariat), find themselves at the crossroad between precarity and privilege. Julian Radlmaier's *Selbstkritik eines bürgerlichen Hundes* (*Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog* GER, 2017) deals with this issue in a very explicit, self-reflexive way. Its protagonist is a filmmaker on the dole who is sent by the German workfare program to work seasonally as an apple picker. Once at the orchard, when the other workers attempt a revolt, he discovers that his attachment to his status as an artist impedes him to join their struggle. The autofictional form of the film, I demonstrate, reflects a subjectivation dynamic that turns into a spiral of perceived debt, guilt, and political paralysis. By internalizing a widespread anti-intellectual bias, the film offers a paradigmatic account of why it is difficult for members of the cognitariat to solidarize with other segments of the precariat or the working class: the difficulty depends largely on the internalization of neoliberal capitalism's ambivalent consideration of immaterial, cognitive, and creative work.

Keywords: Precarity; Contemporary European Cinema; Cognitive Work; Autofiction; Social Classes

“Braccia rubate all’agricoltura” (literally “arms stolen from agriculture”, meaning “hands better suited to farming”) is an Italian saying that is often used to describe pretentious but failed artists and intellectuals. As classist as it may sound, it is a judgment that, ironically, seems to apply perfectly to the protagonist of Julian Radlmaier’s first feature film *Selbstkritik eines bürgerlichen Hundes* [*Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog*] (2017)¹, in which the young director Julian (played by the 1984-born director himself), unable to find funding for his new film, is sent by the job center to work as seasonal apple picker in Brandenburg, the rural region surrounding Berlin.

When Julian learns about this decision, he convinces Camille (Deragh Campbell), whom he is trying to seduce, to join him pretending he is going to do field research for his new movie about the working class. While working there, they cross paths with foreign workers Hong (Kyung-Taek Lie) and Sancho (Beniamin Forti), and with a mute monk with magical powers (Ilia Korkashvili). Camille mingles easily with them and the other workers, while Julian is suspicious and intimidated. Their different attitudes are reflected in their reactions to the workers’ decision to strike and, when the orchard’s owner is presumed dead in an accident, to self-organize and manage the business collectively. When the workers are all fired by the re-awakened owner, the narrative splits. While Julian goes back to Berlin and writes a film that tells what happens to his former coworkers, Camille, Hong and Sancho are convinced by the monk (through the miracle of a multiplication of beans) to walk to Italy, where they will find the utopia of “communism without communists.” The monk, who has no papers, is stopped at the border. The other three continue their journey, only to find out that the monk’s prediction was wrong, so Hong and Sancho are forced to work illegal, precarious jobs, and end up in prison. This provisional ending will be shown as Julian’s film within the film (called “The

Pursuit of Happiness”), which is presented at Venice Film Festival. During the post-premiere Q&A, attended by Camille and the monk, the latter transforms Julian into a greyhound, as a punishment for his hubris and class betrayal. It turns out that what he depicted in the film has apparently happened for real: Hong and Sancho are actually in jail, and the last scene shows Camille and the monk digging a tunnel to free them, aided by Julian in his four-legged version.

In my analysis of the film I intend to start by highlighting a peculiar tension between precarity and privilege that is typically ascribed to the so-called cognitariat (a term blending the words “cognitive” – labor – and “proletariat”, see: Negri, 2007; Berardi, 2013). Members of this social group share a certain cultural capital and a lack of economic capital (see: Bourdieu, 1979). It regards “(1) people who engage with labour related to fields of knowledge and their corresponding demands; (2) who, qualifications notwithstanding, are at risk of getting caught in contingent cycles of insecure sessional work; (3) [...] are able to perceive and navigate such a precarious existence differently to, say, the undereducated laborer or insufficiently established migrant [...] due to their credentials and access to social, cultural and intellectual capital” (Mauri, 2015, p. 3). This ability could translate into the potential for the cognitariat to offer a critical analysis of its own (and society’s) condition as well as to promote social change, but it can also turn, as the film shows, into a spiral of perceived debt, guilt, and political paralysis. The autofictional, self-reflexive form of the film, I will show, reproduces this latter subjectivation dynamic, offering an interesting account of why it is difficult for members of the cognitariat to solidarize with other segments of the precariat or the working class. I will argue that this difficulty depends largely on the internalization of neoliberal capitalism’s ambivalent consideration of immaterial, cognitive, and creative labor.²

1 Hereafter: *Self-Criticism*.

2 I will be using these terms almost as synonyms because they all participate in the debate surrounding the so-called cultural industries. For a review of the different stances and theories contributing to the debate see Gill and Pratt, 2008. Similarly, the concepts of “intellectual” and “artist”, which in this film almost coincide, will be used interchangeably. Radlmaier himself has an academic background and “the turn from academic writing to filmmaking did not [...] signal a rejection of academic discourse. On the contrary, [his] desire to make films derives from a will to engage with political and aesthetic-theoretical approaches, to take theory seriously and allow it to be the basis of [his] productions.” (Pantenburg, 2019, p. 57).

Between Precarity and Privilege

Immediately after the film's title, Julian's voiceover is heard stating: "I lived on welfare, vaguely hoping for a grant to write a new screenplay". Radlmaier's use of the lack of funding for artistic and intellectual pursuits as a starting point aligns him with a small wave of German films that self-reflectively address this aspect of independent filmmaking in precarious

times. Lars Meyer (2019) has called this wave the "new German discourse comedy", whose films he describes as Brechtian, anti-psychological, anti-consumerist, more a staged essay than a plot.³ In this vein, Radlmaier's cinema typically condenses the reflection on social issues into small scenes between the satirical and the surreal, and this is clearly seen in his depiction of precarity.



Fig. 1 *Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog*, Julian Radlmaier, 2017.

3 To this wave he ascribes a young generation of dffb graduates including Radlmaier, Max Linz (*Ich will mich nicht künstlich aufregen*, [Asta Upset, GER 2014] and *Weitermachen Sanssouci* [Music and Apocalypse, GER 2019]), and Susanne Heinrich (*Das melancholische Mädchen* [Aren't you happy?, GER, 2019]), and adds two older (feminist) filmmakers such as Tatjana Turanskyj (*Eine flexible Frau* [The Drifters], GER 2010) and Irene von Alberti (*Der lange Sommer der Theorie*, [The Long Summer of Theory], GER 2017).

While his voiceover explains that he is unemployed, Julian is shown in the act of reading a manuscript, while sitting on the semi-abandoned bank of a canal, in front of imposing, gated architecture reminiscent of administrative buildings (Fig. 1). In the next scene, he is in fact supposedly inside the building, engaged in conversation with his job center advisor, “case-worker Mr. Koberidze”, played by director Alexandre Koberidze, Radlmaier’s fellow student at the dffb.⁴ A little inside joke for cinephile connoisseurs, a tribute and a testimony to the community⁵ behind the film, but also a double allusion to the precarious context: first, the competition between directors (it is the more established one who deliberates that Julian will take the apple picking job, thus disqualifying him from creative work), and second, an allusion to the fact that the fate of many aspiring artists, no matter how talented, is to end up working as white collars. A similar image, which seems to envisage a possible (even worse) fate for the aspiring director, is also present in the previous scene, the one in which Julian is sitting on the bank of the canal. Behind Julian, a man in a colored windbreaker is collecting empty bottles – a common activity among Berlin’s poor and homeless, as they can exchange them for money in supermarkets and 24-hour shops. The juxtaposition in this scene functions as a metaphor: while Julian’s voiceover describes his economic situation, the presence of a more unfortunate man appears like an omen or even a threat.⁶ By later showing Sancho and Hong undertaking the same activity, Radlmaier further stresses the telling ambiguity of this seemingly marginal issue, which provides a minimum of emergency subsistence for the less well-off,

but also serves as (underpaid) work to clean up the city. Arguably, it somehow epitomizes the expansion of the logic of profit and of individual responsibility while, at the same time, deepening the inequality between those who carelessly leave their empties lying around and those for whom, instead, every bottle is precious - like Hong and Sancho, who greet their first empty bottle as “The building block of our happiness!” and embrace their task with naive enthusiasm (“Finally we are our own masters!”). Similarly, as they see a poster announcing the plantation’s open recruitment, they react in awe: “This might be paradise on earth!”. Julian, on the other hand, is shown immediately afterward telling a friend (Sulgi Lie): “Now they force me to work on a fucking plantation, so humiliating!”. “You’ll be a proletarian now!” the friend taunts him. “If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you!” is Julian’s reply. The shame he displays is one of the elements that connect this film to several other examples⁷ of the “new European cinema of precarity”, which focuses on “insecurities related to loss of social status” (Bardan, 2013). Julian, as an inverted transclasse (see Jaquet, 2014), unequivocally experiences work in the orchard as a downgrade.

The film confirms this perception: agricultural work is far from idealized, and in the part set on the plantation the neoliberal management practices that add to the exploitation of pre-industrial labor are heavily satirized. The world of material⁸ labor is not the only object of its satire, however, the other being that of filmmaking and art. Before leaving for the plantation, Julian attends a party at the house of a former professor of his (Carlos Bustamante). The guests are shown through all

4 Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin. *Self-Criticism* was Radlmaier’s graduation film there.

5 As Pantenburg (2019, p. 67) observes, it is very important for Radlmaier to stress the collective production of his films, whose casts are largely made up of friends and acquaintances.

6 See: “one of the key lessons of the Reagan-Bush era: by making homelessness widespread and visible, the state underlined the reality that most working-class and lower-middle-class people are just a few paychecks from being homeless, thus providing a not-very-subtle lesson about staying in line, not making waves, not acting on principle.” (Kleinmans, 1996, p. 251).

7 Such as *L’emploi du temps* (*Time out*, Laurent Cantet, FR 2001), *Valerie* (Birgit Möller, GER 2006), *Louise Wimmer* (Cyril Mannegun, FR 2011), *Nessuno mi può giudicare* (*Escort in Love*, Massimiliano Bruno, IT 2011), *Giorni e nuvole* (*Days and Clouds*, Silvio Soldini, IT 2007), *El planeta* (Amalia Ullmann, SP/US, 2021).

8 I am using the term as the opposite of Lazzarato (1996)’s notion of “immaterial” labor as a synonym for cognitive labor.

sorts of clichés: listening to twelve-tone chamber music in a living room wallpapered with abstract art, or sitting at a table topped by a mountain of seafood shells (Fig. 2), where Julian has to face ridicule, competition, and pressure from his peers.

While it is made clear that the character would like to be part of this milieu at all costs, the judgment that emerges from its representation is inescapable: art has been sold to the market and is now nothing but a matter of class distinction, whose only function is to feed the ego and fill the pockets of the artist him/herself. A bitter consideration, especially if no-one in this

market seems interested in buying the product one is hoping to sell, as in Julian's case. With regard to this, a scene in the prologue in which Julian meets a critic who does not seem to appreciate his work cleverly suggests that, in addition to the downgrade in status, the fact that he cannot find funding is more of a narcissistic wound than it is a livelihood problem, as it may be evidence of his lack of talent.

The privilege enjoyed by this milieu is linked to other identity privileges that Julian displays. The intersectionality axis of racialization is addressed at the level of belonging or being



Fig. 2 *Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog*, Julian Radlmaier, 2017.

excluded (from German citizenship in this case)⁹. Hong – of Korean descent; Sancho – a Swissman; and even the American Camille, although not racialized in the same way, are all foreigners. On the other hand, Julian’s seamless integration into the national bourgeoisie is signaled by a scene at the plantation in which the workers venture into the surrounding woods to have a picnic. To reach a pond they must cross a tape marking private property. Julian is the only one who is reluctant. (“Quite too law-abiding for a communist

filmmaker,” comments Camille.) When the police arrive to clear the property, we see the owners’ family waiting on the shore (Fig. 3): a woman, two little girls, and a man who looks a lot like Julian.

The issue of gender takes on even greater relevance as the object of the film’s criticism. Julian’s masculinity is put to the test in a confrontation with the apparently more canonically ‘toxic’ one represented by a virile and violent worker (Zurab



Fig. 3 *Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog*, Julian Radlmaier, 2017.

9 On belonging and exclusion see Klinger, 2008.

Rtveliashvili), but also by the former's grotesque professor, who tells his younger guests at his party: "At your age, I had two kids and as a convinced Maoist I worked in a factory, for my re-education! And I fucked, fucked, fucked!" Compared to these aggressive forms, Julian's masculinity is evidently in crisis, maybe reminiscent of anti-intellectual prejudice as a form of feminization. Julian's relation to femininity testifies of an unresolved self-perception and of attempts at negotiating it through deception and manipulation. His way of inhabiting masculinity recalls the figure of the "soft boy" (see Pacifico, 2020), whose attempts at manipulating women stem from an inferiority complex rather than from a sense of superiority and entitlement (see Volpato, 2013). This is evident in the prologue, when he tries to approach women outside the Gemäldegalerie. "After an unproductive morning, I'd gone to the Museum square to watch girls entering and leaving the Art Library on a late summer day" states Julian's voiceover while he is shown staring at a girl sitting on the other side of the steps, looking much more confident and relaxed than him, and dressed way more glamorously. When she leaves, after a moment of hesitation Julian starts to go after her. In the next scene, filmed in long shot on the square, he follows her, but runs away the moment she (presumably feeling stalked) turns around. While running away, he risks bumping into one of the construction workers who are seen moving building material around the square. Despite the fact that Julian (who does not look dangerous to anyone but himself, after all) is presented as comical, so as to raise sympathy rather than contempt, this slapstick gag highlights not only his inadequacy and clumsiness but also his moral abjection in at least two senses: there are people who work for real, and then there is him (who not only is not working but also threatens to get in the way). On top of that, he is also a sexually frustrated stalker.

In an interview Radlmaier describes his protagonist's relationship to sex as being based on projections: his "pursuit of happiness is completely individualized" (Radlmaier & Nechleba, n.d.), he experiences sexuality as a competition. This is in line with those theories that understand neoliberalism as especially effective in coopting all human activities, aspirations and drives into capitalist subjectivation, like Italian operaismo (see Berardi, 2009). However, while the latter sought a dialectic potential in the subjects' affects, Radlmaier is less optimistic. Sexual desire is treated with suspicion, not only for being predatory but also as an obstacle to political ideals: as Julian's voiceover tellingly says: "I wanted to be a communist, but also to sleep with her" [emphasis added]. In the prologue, Julian awkwardly chases Camille around the Gemäldegalerie. This 'hunting' scene at the museum is the first chance to see the two main storylines interact: for the first time Julian and Camille, as well as Sancho and Hong (who work there as ushers), are in the same space. Yet, they run in parallel without ever really meeting. Is this meant to signal the rigid division between workers and the bourgeois in institutional spaces like museums, or does it also indicate the sexual dynamic that engages Julian as a distraction from his concerns about the working class?¹⁰ Radlmaier stated that Julian's romantic ambitions reduce his "utopian potential" (Radlmaier & Nechleba, n.d.). Not coincidentally, Julian perceives the monk (a character by all means positive, saintly and outside the realm of spoken language, completely devoid of sexual desire) as a rival for Camille's attention, just as Radlmaier views him as the opposite of Julian, signaling an opposition between the neoliberal, competitive subjectivity represented by Julian and an ascetic ethic embodied by the monk. Radlmaier stated that "the 'self-criticism' of the film" starts by questioning "the possibility of becoming a political subject without ignoring all the 'ridiculous' affective involvements of those whose political orientation is at stake. Can a middle-class subject, whose socialization was determined by the ideology of neoliberal

10 To this latter interpretation seems to add Radlmaier's most recent film, *Blutsauger* (*Bloodsuckers*, GER 2021) in which the protagonist's involvement with a capitalist vampire woman makes him a counterrevolutionary.

capitalism, ever really desire an egalitarian society? Can she/he go beyond perceiving the promise of equality as a mere threat to the primacy of his [sic.] narcissistic needs? [...] what kind of relationship to the Other would be the necessary condition for the foundation of such a society?" (Radlmaier & Nechleba, n.d.). The one that succeeds in "really desir[ing] an egalitarian society" (Radlmeier in Nechleba, n.d.) is Camille, who incidentally is also never shown to have any sexual drive, nor, for that matter, any artistic ambitions: she is able "to open up to a 'collective desire'" (Radlmaier in Nechleba, n.d.) and capable of evolving. Here we can see an idealization of the female figure: the dynamic that gives rise to Julian's feeling of inadequacy and inferiority (which in his case turns into manipulation) remains the same for Radlmaier as well. Yet, whilst the film can be read as a parable on the character's need to open his eyes to his own privileges, Julian Radlmaier as a director seems to be dramatically aware of them (as white, as a male, and as an intellectual/artist). It is now time to explore in greater depth the relationship between the character and the director.

The Trap of Autofiction

The term "autofiction", coined in 1977 by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in reference to his novel *Fils*, refers to the literary genre in which the author him/herself is the protagonist of the fictional events narrated: as observed by Tinelli (2022), the typical features of this genre are the onomastic correspondence between author, narrator, and character, which underlies the autobiographical mechanism, and a fictional pact, i.e., certain textual signals that prompt the reader to consider the text as a product of invention. Starting from real-life cues, the author's narrating and eponymous self develops a field of spurious autobiography, shaded by fiction, confusing reality and fantasy, mixing the symbolic and the imaginary. The simultaneous presence of autobiography and fiction calls into question their presumptions of transparency and complexity

(Tinelli, 2022, p. 46). According to Giglioli (2011, p. 20), the assumption on which autofiction is based is the difficult representability of experience. Born with an explicit psychoanalytic inspiration, as an investigation of the unconscious, with the arrival of the postmodern the most widespread theme in autofiction work becomes the problematic relationship between truth and falsehood, between identity and difference, in a society dominated by technical images and simulacra. Self-Criticism makes no exception. To read our example as a (metaphorical) autobiography would be both misleading and accurate. In a sense, Self-Criticism is indeed an actual reflection on the director's real experience and feelings, in a more explicit way than would normally happen in films or any other work of creative expression. However, the way it does so is not in the supposed adherence of the character, Julian, to the director, Radlmaier. As we already suggested, character and director overlap and diverge, and generally speaking we can consider the character as a derogatory version of Radlmaier, whom we can only meet through his public interventions. However, as a public figure speaking reflectively of his film in the interviews we quoted above, he is himself yet another 'character' playing a role in the artistic arena. The creation of "hyperreal identities with no recourse back to a real person, their composite media image being more real than real" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 238) is a typical feature of postmodernism. In this case, exploring the contrasts between appearance and reality means therefore coming to the conclusion that the two do not exist on separate planes, but are implicated in each other.

Postmodernism is "distinguished by the idea that there is not one but many truths and that the notion of pure truth is an illusion" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 251) and in it "the idea of authenticity is always in question" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 252). According to postmodern sensibility "there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated experience" (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, p. 252). Yet in Radlmaier

this acknowledgment does not reflect the playful (and often cynical¹¹) approach typical of a postmodern sensibility: it is considered in the light of a judgment derived from modernity and therefore experienced as claustrophobic. One important reference can be read as a comment on this feeling: in the prologue, Hong is shown at the Gemäldegalerie, standing in profile, motionless and framed between two doors that give the perspective depth and allow a glimpse of the other rooms – a compositional choice typical of Radlmaier when he films interiors. The man turns his face slowly towards the camera and whistles. This is the first explicit allusion to breaking the fourth wall in the film, a suggestion that is immediately disavowed by the next shot - a reverse shot showing Hong from behind as he repeats the action. In the background, sitting in another room, is the man he is addressing, his colleague Sancho, who ignores his call. "At first, there's nothing unusual about this story", states Julian's voiceover: "A man watches a painting" and at this point we see (in Hong's POV) the *Apparition at Arles at Night* by Fra Angelico. (Fig. 4)

This painting shows a bare room in which St Francis appears above the Latin inscription *Pax Vobis* [Peace (be) with you] before five surprised monks. The room has two doors, from one of which, on the left, another monk can be seen leaving, while through the one at the back right appears the green of a forest. It is a night scene, only lit by the glow of the saint, which clashes with the film's always very clean, bright cinematography. However, the composition of perspective and the depth of field are reminiscent of the scenes we have seen before, and hint at an escape route, as remarked by the voice over: "Just what is it that fascinates him so? Maybe the door opening onto a green garden?". The game of Chinese boxes and *mise en abyme* is constantly evoked, alluded to, displayed both visually and conceptually, yet the film seems to want to escape from it.

The feeling of being trapped is primarily related to the narrowness and partiality of the individual perspective. "One signpost of the difference between a modern and a post-modern critical sensibility is the acknowledgment that we cannot occupy a position outside of the milieu we analyze." (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 252). The director's point of view is narrow and trapped, just as his character is trapped in his dog form. After the frame with Angelico's painting, the voiceover recounts: "I'd often told stories about people like Hong. But soon, we'd have to share a story, which I didn't like at all." The first explicit statement that places the protagonist in relation to the workers is one that postulates a distance between them. Hong used to be an object of representation. Now something is supposedly about to change, but the protagonist (and the director) can still not escape their own first-person voice naming its object (Hong), i.e. they cannot escape their own position. Reflexivity itself conveys the same feeling of claustrophobia. "Reflexivity emerged as a style in postmodernism", write Sturken and Cartwright (2009), although "the practice of making viewers aware of the means of production by incorporating them into the content of the cultural product was often a feature of modernism" (p. 254). Referentiality and the meta-reflection here do not aim at externalizing a process, as in modern cinema, but rather denote a sense of powerlessness, of the impossibility of transcending a position. Totality is lost forever, and this awareness, instead of being claimed as it is in modernism, is experienced with nostalgia (see: Lie, 2012).

In its postmodern use of modernity, Self-Criticism cannot hide its nostalgia: the loss of totality is a tragedy, its acknowledgment needs to be constantly remarked, as a constant return to trauma, a compulsion to repeat. It is a repetition from which comes the yearning to escape. Similarly, autofiction arises from the same feeling of being under siege, but cannot do

11 Postmodern aesthetic is "deeply implicated within the ideologies of consumer culture. In its rejection of nostalgia, universal humanism, and a single concept of truth, postmodernism is also about acknowledging the overlap between the categories of art, commerce, news, and advertising. This means that there is both increased blurring of these boundaries as well as an acknowledgement that they were never as separate as imaged in modernism" (Sturken & Cartwright., 2009, pp. 276-277).



Fig. 4 *Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog*, Julian Radmaier, 2017.

much else than reinforce it, thus diminishing the perceived agency of the subject: as Giglioli points out (2011, p. 48), a relationship with reality is staged in which the more the subject talks about themselves, the more they seem to step aside to write the record of their marginality, powerlessness, even nonexistence. Rather than a narrative of actions, it is a catalog of actions missed, not performed or impossible to perform. We now need to understand where this sense of impotency comes from.

Debt, Guilt, and Class Consciousness

In the shift from a society based on standardization and prescribed patterns (Ehrenberg, 2016) to one in which creative self-realization has become a compulsion for most individuals (Menke and Rebentisch, 2016), one effect has been widespread depression, a social pathology that arises from inadequacy in a social context in which success is attributed to, and expected of, the individual. Depression is therefore the product of a competitive environment, but also of the

new post-Fordist phase and its demands in terms of creativity, autonomy and self-realization. According to Lazzarato (2012), the gradual introjection of individual responsibility has to do with the ongoing tertiarization and an "immaterialization" not only of labor, but of the capitalist system as a whole. This has led to a shift from a society based on (market) exchange, as it was in earlier liberal capitalism, to one based on credit, as in neoliberalism. A society based on credit creates different social ties and a hierarchy between creditors and debtors. "Taking on debts is quintessential for the precarious subject, as these financial instruments allow for her/his labour to continue and, simultaneously, perpetrate the desire for social mobility and economic affirmation. Indeed, applying for loans is encouraged and praised as the independent and courageous choice of the individual manager, who does not need social care and dares to attempt autonomously to the promise of improving her/his status." (Sticchi, 2021, p. 12). Conversely, relying on the State for security, as well as receiving welfare support is "dialogically framed as a moral debt," and therefore "the opportunity to rebalance a visible inequality is not experienced [...] as a right or a due political action but as an economic transaction" (Sticchi, 2021, p. 213). This is linked to the demonization and blaming of the poor, "connecting financial indigency to personal guilt" (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 130).¹²

The same logic applies to artistic laborers and intellectual workers: as self-entrepreneurs, their success or failure depends on themselves, and their precarity is framed as the by-product of a personal choice: if they do not make it, they have only themselves to blame. This is linked to the

ambivalent status of creative labor in mainstream discourse, which reinforces the moralization of poverty for the cognitivarians. The additional blame that follows is that of having embarked on something that was connected to their desires and goals of self-realization (see McRobbie, 2015). Given the desirable stakes, a higher rate of failure appears justified. The third blaming is the following: the risky choice the artists made had nothing to do with benefiting and contributing to society as a whole, so their failure should not be a burden for society. These three assumptions (the artists are autonomous and independently responsible for their success or failure; they are aspirational and eager to accept a higher level of risk; their ambition is self-centered and morally questionable) derive from a combination of the neoliberal logic of financial capitalism and earlier ideals of productivity. Together, these contribute to an understanding of the artists as privileged, and not entitled to complain about their lack of financial support, resources or security. All three accusations and both aspects can be seen in Radlmaier's self-criticism, which speaks of an internalization of the logic of debt. The economy of debt needs a figure that "assumes responsibility, encumbers itself with debt, and internalizes the risks as guilt" (Lorey, 2019, p. 155). It creates a whole new subjectivity: in debt economy, writes Stimilli (2015, p. 71), work becomes "work on the self", producing a subjectivity based on a new "moral condition". We now need to move on to an analysis of the moral stance put forward by Radlmaier's film in its quasi-argumentative, discursive (see: Kirsten, 2022) logic.

Although Radlmaier often attempts to find "lines of conflict that cut across social strata," (Pantenburg, 2019, p. 69)¹³,

12 This social blaming is constantly experienced by the whole precariat, who need to face "the condemnation lobbed at many in the precariat by politicians and middle-class commentators castigating them as lazy, directionless, undeserving, socially irresponsible or worse." (Standing, 2016, p. 20).

13 According to Pantenburg (2019, p. 69) this comes from Radlmaier's intent not to generalize his characters' behavior 'anthropologically'. We can read in this sense the solidarity between Camille and the workers at the orchard, or a scene in which Hong and Sancho are eating lunch and Hong lectures Sancho on the saint's life: "St Francis lived among the poor, spoke to the birds, and always gave away his clothes" says with admiration, looking at the sky. "Because he was a communist" he concludes. "What an idiot!" replies Sancho. As a small confirmation of two different dispositions of mind is the following gag: while Hong stands up to observe a cloud that "looks like a dog", Sancho steals his sandwich replacing it with his own, almost finished.

when it comes to his cognitarians, changing position is only possible as long as they undergo a process of recognition of their guilty privilege, and possibly of punishment and expiation, which in the film is symbolized by Julian's transformation into a dog. Being 'downgraded' to apple picking is not enough, because this experience could still be exploited to make art. Although in the end Hong and Sancho will need help to escape from jail, it will not be Julian the aspiring director to save them, but Julian the dog. Solidarity is achieved only through punishment. What is it that needs to be punished, though? Is it the artist's greed, their introjection of the capitalist logic of the market or is it intellectual knowledge itself? Let us return to the scene of Hong watching the Angelico painting. In pointing it out to Sancho, Hong repeats the gesture of a tourist who had just left him her audio-guide. The woman had pointed out the painting to his partner: "Look, it's St. Francis", to which he replied "Fucking communist!" and left. When Hong draws Sancho's attention to the painting, he is unimpressed, and will call the saint an "idiot". What does the repetition of the dynamics allude to? Looking at the painting, Hong seems excited. Is it because of the saint himself or because he had the chance to catch the reference thanks to the audio guide? Did he know St. Francis before? Is he reenacting what has just happened or is his enthusiasm genuine? The question is neither trivial nor uninteresting, given that the whole film, by questioning the role of the artist and the intellectual, deals explicitly with the problem of the relationship between knowledge and power. How much does Hong know? Throughout the film, he is treated as an idiot savant. According to Radlmaier, in fact, naivety is a requirement for political action: "The 'idiot' is a character who doesn't understand why the world is as it is, and not different. Who is capable of imagining a different

world, against all probabilities. That's the idiocy of Hong and Sancho. They represent the principle – one might say: the dignity – of fiction: the ability of creating a distance to the logic of reality. It's precisely that distance which allows us to break free from the fatal circle of the everlasting repetition of the same. So it's all about a form of 'aesthetic idiocy', of an affirmative naivety." (Radlmaier & Nachleba, n.d.)¹⁴

On a similar note, Pantenburg has spoken of Radlmaier's "enlightened naïveté": Self-Criticism "raises the question of where filmmakers and intellectuals stand vis-à-vis leftist utopias. The amazing thing about Radlmaier's film is how its consistent self-irony [...] does not culminate in cynicism." (2019, p. 68) This oxymoron recalls the "informed naivety" or "pragmatic idealism" used to describe the sensibility associated with meta-modernity (see: Van den Akker, Gibbons, & Vermeulen, 2017), oscillating between modernism and postmodernism. These formulations exhibit an internal dialectic - synchronic rather than diachronic. If meta-modernity retrieves the concept of dialectics from the modern phase, it understands it, however, in an even more radically post-modern, i.e., anti-historical dimension, based on a schizophrenic and insurmountable coexistence. It hypostatizes the two sides as in static opposition. The renunciation of totality, in this case, is no longer accompanied, as was the case in postmodernism, by a reassuring sense of superiority based on irony and detachment, but rather by a search - sometimes nostalgic, sometimes pioneering, for new forms of trust - or faith.

The use of the fantastic in the film can be read in this sense. Hoping for a miracle that will let one's sins to be atoned for is the only thing the artist can resort to in order to hope for redemption from a condition he is not only a victim of, but also

14 The use of (Christian) religious metaphors (the apples and the orchard as "paradise on earth", the monk and St Francis, the punishment of Julian), the quotes from Roberto Rossellini (not only *Francesco giullare di Dio* [*The Flowers of St. Francis*, IT 1950] but also *Europa '51* [*Europe '51*, IT 1952] mentioned by Julian) are used by Radlmaier to talk about communism as a utopian and (irrational, religious) faith. Following Walter Benjamin, for Stimilli (2015) it is capitalism, instead, an essentially religious belief, a cult that does not allow expiation, but rather produces guilt and debt. (p. 147.) Under this light, Radlmaier's praise of asceticism has a deep affinity with the European austerity into which Stimilli casts the reflection on the indebted subject.

guiltily responsible for, not just because of his inaction, but of the very fact that he knows too much. We have already mentioned a feeling of being trapped: having a partial perspective means lacking totality – a totality of which the film is nostalgic, however, while being aware that it could be accessed only by those whom Julian might now try to help: the idiots, the unfortunates. These have something Julian does not have, and that the director wants for himself: hope. This hope comes from their experience of exclusion but also, most importantly, from the lack of knowledge and understanding of its causes. Theoretical knowledge is constantly shown as being in contrast and opposition with first-hand experience, such as in a scene where Camille tells Julian that her uncle died in a Soviet gulag, thereby silencing him when he mentions the communist utopia. Julian's awareness, even his knowledge of not knowing enough, leads to his silence: too much theoretical knowledge seems to imply the film, leads to impotency and paralysis. Therefore, the one who knows (interestingly, "knowledge worker" is another definition used to refer to the cognitariat) is opposed to the naive Monk, Hong, and Sancho. If in other films on the cognitariat the intellectual condition is seen as a desired outcome, or as a coveted escape route whose downside is its economic unprofitability, something different happens here: it is not the lack of economic reward that is tight, but the intellectual's position itself. To know more is to know less about real life, and therefore to have less agency. Naivety and genuine hope are therefore the impulse that intellectuals lack because of their too acute knowledge and understanding of their privilege, as well as of previous failed attempts at political change. The disparity in terms of social and cultural capital that marks the different class background between Julian on the one hand and Hong and Sancho on the other is experienced as guilt: if Julian as a character is ashamed of being downgraded, Radlmaier as a director is ashamed of his own privilege. One of the reasons why Julian's political beliefs are expressed in such a way as to make them feel phony is that Radlmaier, as an intellectual, feels less legitimated than other subjects to articulate any political hope.

Although the film relates the cognitariat to other forms of precarity, the perception of the artist's willing implication in and moral responsibility for the situation he denounces does not allow the intellectual to participate in the struggle. Even making art is suspect from his position, as testified by a dialogue between Julian and Camille. When Julian is too afraid to go on strike, he pretends with her that it is the other workers who refused to start it. "We should try and agitate them in some way" she suggests. He responds: "I've thought about that a lot, but this would only reproduce dominant class relations and it would not lead to real emancipation. So we should just wait until the contradictions of late capitalism escalate until the end so that a real revolutionary situation can appear." (To which Camille comments: "I don't know, that's depressing"). Of course, the film is supposedly making fun of Julian's position, which underlies his cowardice. Yet, as we saw, Radlmaier clearly shares the doubts that are being ridiculed by putting them in Julian's mouth. In Radlmaier's argumentative structure, perceived indebtedness and guilt are strictly intertwined with the role of intellectual and artist (both as a surplus category created by a system that cannot reabsorb it and as more politically aware and informed than other categories). This happens because his self-criticism does not only internalize the dominant idea of the intellectual as not useful to the system, but also opposes that of the intellectual as a potential political vanguard. Such incompatibility of artistic and political ambitions appears all the more tragic at a time when traditional forms of political representation - parties, trade unions - are waning and art is called upon, not lastly by the market itself, to commit. The film's take can be read as a welcome rejection of this onerous task, were it not for its lapsing into an anti-intellectual bias. Such bias reflects a deep devaluation of immaterial labor, which deep down undergirds even the neoliberal invitation to take it as a model for self-entrepreneurship (as is the case in *Florida*, 2002). Even in this new glorification, what matters is its productivity, its capability to be put to value. The anti-intellectual bias, the insistence on the unproductiveness (also political, in this case) of immaterial labor, therefore, is reminiscent of two cornerstones of reactionary and conservative rhetoric, as Mattioli (2017) notes:

the simultaneous attack on social democracy (as an indebted, financially unsustainable model) and on the 1968 movement which has arguably brought about the hopes for a revolutionary outcome of the democratization of education.

The conclusions of the film, therefore, cannot be politically daring. Despite Julian's precarity, his final reunion with Hong and Sancho does not stem from a shared class interest, but from his own punishment. Radlmaier cannot present his artist as a victim, because he is too aware of the comparison with other, worse, forms of precarity, which he feels responsible for. But at the same time, as evidenced by the fact that as an artist Julian can do nothing but exploit Hong and Sancho's misfortunes, he cannot do anything about them as such, even though he is one of their causes! To take part in the class struggle, the film explains, he must abandon his interests as an artist and embrace those of others with whom he shared a fate briefly on the plantation but with whom even then he never wanted to mix. In the diegesis, it is Julian's privilege that prevents this blending, while the film itself, as results from our analysis, seems to suggest that it is the awareness of privilege that prevents it. Awareness as an obstacle to class solidarity is a dynamic that functions like the psychoanalytic notion of the superego: an "insatiable agency that bombards me with impossible demands and mocks my failed attempts to meet them [...] the agency in the eyes of which I am all the more guilty, the more I try to suppress my 'sinful' strivings" (Žižek, 2023). Julian must acknowledge his privilege, but at the same time Radlmaier shows that precisely by doing so he cannot feel entitled to embrace his own political interests, hopes, and beliefs. "You must but you can't, because you shouldn't. The greatest sin is to do what you should strive for... This convoluted structure of an injunction, which is fulfilled when we fail to meet it, accounts for the paradox of superego. As Freud noted, the more we obey the superego commandment, the guiltier we feel." (Žižek, 2023). It is a paradoxical structure that reminds the one we observed functioning in autofiction, in which - as Tinelli observes - we have a structurally frustrated and therefore implicitly aggressive self (2022, p. 48), as it longs for an image of itself, but can never correspond to

it. It is precisely the excessive yearning for this ideal-self-image that causes the lack of agency as well as impotence.

Conclusion

According to Guy Standing, one of the conditions for the precariat to become a "class for itself" and "gain the strength to oppose [...] social and economic forces, and seek structural change", is that "more people recognise that their situation is due not to personal failings but to structural factors and policies" (Standing, 2014). Self-Criticism is a symptomatic example for investigating the factors that prevent the constitution of a shared class consciousness among the cognitariat and, above all, an effective solidarity with other precarious subjects. Despite its fantastic and messianic hope for a convergence of struggles, Radlmaier's film focuses on the impossibility of this happening, placing the responsibility squarely on the category of cognitarians who, in its representation, are, however precarious, still privileged, since they are artists and intellectuals. While their privilege distances them from other precarious conditions, the acknowledgement of such privilege can only provide a way out and political agency through the intervention of a *deus ex machina*. The choice to explore the subjectivity of the cognitariat through autofiction turns out to be a trap, functioning as a superego whose demands can never be met and whose pleasure lies precisely in its necessary failure. Exposing this dynamic, Radlmaier demysticizes attempts to portray the cognitariat as the plausible revolutionary subject or as the avant-garde of social change: The subjectivity of its members is too deeply imbricated in the dynamics of subjectivation that plague everyone under neoliberalism. By presenting this dynamic of debt and guilt as progressive, however, his film displays an unreflected affinity with the same neoliberal subjectivity it purports to criticize. The dominant anti-intellectual discourse, in the self-understanding of a category that is particularly aware of systemic injustices, turns into a sense of guilt that is in fact quite consistent with the neoliberal process of individualizing responsibility, and the general tendency to turn political conflicts into (virtually insoluble) moral dilemmas.

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